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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 002901

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR H, PM, EAP/BCLTV

DOD FOR DASD JENNINGS AND OSD/ISA STERN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND DEFENSE MINISTER DISCUSS POW/MIA,
IMET, DEMINING

11. (SBU) Summary: The Vietnam Defense Minister confirmed in his introductory meeting with the Ambassador October 26 that underwater POW/MIA recovery operations can be conducted on a Vietnamese Navy vessel, a civilian vessel or not at all. English language training for military officers remains a priority, but not enough to extract a pledge to sign an IMET agreement. Both sides agree that POW/MIA recovery operations and demining/UXO clearance efforts have been very successful and have contributed to a positive and developing bilateral military relationship. End Summary.

12. (U) The Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff and DATT, met Defense Minister Senior General Pham Van Tra at the Ministry of Defense Guest House October 26. Tra was accompanied by Major General Pham Thanh Lan and two Senior Colonels from the Ministry of Defense. The meeting lasted 30 minutes; from the friendly atmospherics, it could have gone longer had the Russian Ambassador not been waiting outside for his exit call with the Defense Minister.

POW/MIA RECOVERY: ONE BRIGHT SPOT

13. (U) The Ambassador detailed his discussions with Admiral Fargo at PACOM and the significant steps the United States and Vietnam had taken on bilateral military relations in the previous year. General Tra agreed that relations had developed "very well" and cited POW/MIA recovery operations as a particular bright spot. Vietnam had turned over more than 700 sets of remains to the United States, and U.S. veterans had provided information key to the identification of over 1,000 Vietnamese soldiers. "We are ready to cooperate on MIA operations virtually anywhere you wish," Tra told the Ambassador.

BUT NO U.S. NAVY RECOVERY VESSELS. . .

14. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that key U.S. priorities on POW/MIA are to be able to conduct recovery operations in the Central Highlands and underwater. To resolve those issues, the United States needs General Tra's assistance, he said. General Tra acknowledged that "we have yet to agree" on the underwater recovery operations issue. The United States had proposed using a U.S. Navy vessel to conduct underwater recovery operations, but Vietnam feels that "warships should be in Vietnam for goodwill visits only. A ship that loiters in our waters would not be acceptable." General Tra said there are two possible scenarios under which underwater recovery operations could be conducted: either with U.S. personnel operating on a Vietnamese ship, or with a U.S. civilian ship. The Ambassador noted that Vietnamese military personnel had visited Japan and Hawaii to gain a greater understanding of the underwater recovery process and the ships that are necessary for success. In a similar vein, U.S. personnel visited Vietnam recently to review Vietnam's capabilities in this regard. It is time to move beyond the exchange and theoretical stage and begin operations, the Ambassador stated. He agreed to pass on to Washington the constraints General Tra had explained.

DEMINING/UXO CLEARANCE - MORE SUCCESS

15. (U) General Tra raised the issue of demining and UXO clearance, noting appreciatively that Vietnamese units had been able to "do very good work" in three central provinces using U.S.-provided equipment. The Ambassador added that knowledge is the basis for effective clearance work, and the goal of the United States is to fund a national-level survey of the type being done in the three central provinces.

BILATERAL EXCHANGES: KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK

16. (U) Both the Ambassador and General Tra praised the pace and substance of bilateral military exchanges, noting the greater mutual understanding developed through these exchanges, including General Tra's visit to the United

States in 2003. The Ambassador said he hopes to continue this trend with high-level visits in 2005. General Tra noted that Vietnam would be very busy with celebrations (of the 30th anniversary of unification) and therefore high-level visits would have to be planned carefully to avoid any conflicts with important local events.

STILL TO IRON OUT: DECONTAMINATION ISSUE AND IMET AGREEMENT

17. (U) General Tra told the Ambassador that Vietnam wants the United States to assist with the decontamination of four former U.S. military bases in Vietnam. The Ambassador explained that U.S. law prohibits the Department of Defense from engaging in this sort of activity, but added that other U.S. agencies -- notably the Environmental Protection Agency, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Health and Human Services -- had been to Vietnam on humanitarian missions and had spent substantial sums of time and money.

18. (U) The Ambassador asked General Tra about Vietnam's plans to sign an IMET agreement with the United States, which would be a prerequisite for any military training -- particularly English language training for officers -- that the United States could provide to Vietnam. General Tra lamented the sorry state of the English language skills of his officers, saying that it makes it difficult for Vietnamese officers to participate usefully in any international training. Australia and the UK are both working on English language programs as a way to assist Vietnam, he added, and the People's Army had recently opened an English language training facility. The Ambassador reminded Tra that, without an IMET agreement, the United States is unable to assist Vietnam's military in this area -- and that money for such assistance is available but being left behind because of the lack of an agreement.

19. (SBU) Comment: General Tra was alert and engaged for the entire conversation, referring to his staff only once for clarification on one of the finer points of the IMET agreement. He was clearer about the use of a U.S. ship for underwater recovery operations than other interlocutors have been; previously we had been exploring solutions that would have a U.S. ship and a Vietnamese ship conduct operations side-by-side in a "training exercise." General Tra did not mention this at all, and, when he linked the ship visits to the underwater recovery operations by saying that one was appropriate for U.S. warships and one was not, he got vigorous head-nodding agreement from his assembled staff members, as though he had repeated his talking point just right. Finally, despite appearing a bit rushed in wrapping up the meeting, General Tra seemed to truly enjoy it, and when he told the Ambassador "we should meet each other again soon," he sounded sincere. End Comment.

MARINE